

4th Sunday After Pentecost, Year B, 2021
Rev. Amy Starr Redwine

Some of the best stories in the Bible are the stories of David, the shepherd boy, the musician, the poet, the warrior, Israel's greatest king. We don't hold up David as an exemplary king just because of his long reign or his victories on the battlefield. Yes, these are crucial parts of the David story, but what is really remarkable is that, of all the many and colorful characters in the Bible, David is the one who feels the most like us, utterly, wonderfully *human*.

Our connection to David starts with today's story, which begins with two armies at a standoff. These were agrarian tribesmen, so we are not talking a huge battle; probably more of a skirmish. The Philistines had two advantages over the Israelites: imported iron weapons and an enormous warrior named Goliath — imagine Arnold Swarzenegger in his Terminator Days, but about one and half times taller. King Saul wisely refused to let his army engage with the Philistines, because he knew they'd get slaughtered.¹ David, the baby of his family, had been sent by his father to bring provisions to his older brothers, who were soldiers. He enters the scene and witnesses the terror that overcomes the Israelites when Goliath taunts them. And then, in a series of remarkable events, the boy David ends up being the only one on the battlefield brave enough to take on the giant, using not the ill-fitting armor of the king, but his trusty slingshot, and a deeply held conviction that he fights in the name and with the power of God. And sure enough, with one well-aimed shot, David fells Goliath.

Is there anything more satisfying than a story where the underdog triumphs? One of my favorites is told in the movie *Hoosiers*. This movie depicts the true story of the high school basketball team in rural Indiana that improbably made it to the state championship. In one scene the players enter the arena where they will play the championship game and are instantly

¹ <http://thedianerehmsow.org/shows/2015-10-05/geraldine-brooks-the-secret-chord>

dismayed at the size of it. They are used to playing in front of a couple hundred people; this stadium seats thousands. So their coach gets out a tape measure and has the players measure the distance from the foul line to the basket and from the basket to the floor. Turns out the court that feels so huge has the exact same dimensions as all the standard courts they've practiced on and played on and won on before.

The story of David and Goliath served a similar purpose for the first people who wrote it down; these scribes were trying to help those who would read it make sense of a senseless situation. Those who first recorded the stories of King David, including this story of David and Goliath, did so in the sixth century BCE, when the Israelites had been taken into exile, driven from their land, their homes destroyed. These stories were written for a community in total despair, a people who were trying to figure out how in the world things had gone so wrong, what the future could possibly hold, and where God was in these terrible events.

In answer to these questions, the scribes describe this captivating scene: the giant Goliath threatens to make mincemeat of the Israelites and take them as the Philistines' slaves. But the Israelites have been there, done that. They know all about a life of slavery and they are desperate to avoid it. But they are also terrified because they know -- they *know* -- there is no Israelite who will go up against Goliath. There isn't even anyone willing to try.

So they wait, doing nothing, trying not to antagonize their enemy. They seem to think that if they hold very, very still, if they barely breathe, maybe, just maybe, Goliath and his army will give up and go away. King Saul and his army can only imagine two options: send someone to battle Goliath, which means they will all end up enslaved to the Philistines; or do nothing and hope the Philistine army and their awful giant will get bored and leave them alone. Needless to say, morale is low. They are paralyzed by fear.

But when the boy shepherd David arrives, he offers a whole new perspective. From the moment he sizes up the scene, David is the only one there able to remember the most important thing of all, the thing all these well-armed soldiers have forgotten: they are the people of the living God, and these soldiers are the army of that God! The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The God of Moses; the God who rained down plagues on Pharaoh and parted the sea so that the Israelites walked on dry land while Pharaoh's army drowned behind them. The God who brought the people through the wilderness and into the Promised Land.

David refuses to let Goliath and his size and strength and threats define him or his people. He sizes up the scene with an imagination dominated by God. For the Israelite army, Goliath and the fear he invoked in them had become the center of their universe, the most important thing in their lives; they can do nothing but watch and listen to every move he makes and every word he utters. But David shows them — and us — a different way.²

And God knows, from time to time, we all need to be shown a different way, because we let the Goliaths in our lives take over. We all have things we fear — illness, addiction, loneliness, failure, financial ruin, or some secret we are sure we cannot share — and those fears can grow bigger and bigger until they hijack our imagination, our ability to envision a future beyond the challenges of today. Not only that, but our fears have a way of overwhelming our ability to remember and sense the presence and love of God.

The story of David and Goliath answers an existential question, a question that every individual, every community, every nation — and, yes, every church — faces at one time or another: what do we do when fear overshadows hope? what do we do when it looks like promises we were made — or even promises we ourselves made — might not be kept? What do

² Eugene Peterson, *Leap over a Wall*. HarperOne, 1998.

we do when we feel threatened by forces outside ourselves, when it feels like everything we hold dear is falling apart?

What David did, when he came face to face with Goliath, was remember what he already knew deep within his soul: that God is faithful, that God is present, that God equips us with what we need for the task at hand. David remembered God. David knew that he did not need the trappings of someone else's ill-fitting armor to do what he did best, he simply needed to choose a smooth stone from the river and send it flying.

The Baptist preacher and civil rights activist Will Campbell was once invited to participate in a debate on capital punishment. At the last minute, he discovered that his opponent was an erudite scholar. After his opponent delivered a lengthy philosophical argument in favor of the death penalty, Campbell got up to deliver the case against it. He had prepared no long or intellectual remarks, so after a long pause he said, slowly and deliberately, "I just think it's tacky." Then he sat down.

The audience laughed. "Tacky?" the moderator asked. "Yessir," Campbell repeated. "I just think it's tacky."

"Now, come on, Will," the moderator said, "'Tacky' is an old Southern word, and it means uncouth, ugly, lack of class."

"Yessir, I know what it means," Campbell replied. "And if a thing is ugly, well, ugly means there's no beauty there. And if there is no beauty in it, there is no truth in it. And if there is no truth in it, there is no good in it. Not for the victim of the crime. Certainly not for the one being executed. Not for the executioner, the jury, the judge, the state. For no one. And we were enjoined by a well-known Jewish prophet to love them all."³

³ Paul Loeb, *Soul of a Citizen*. St. Martin's Press, 2010.

When faced with our fears, it is so easy to let them take over, to let them define us. When that happens, we tend to make things more complicated than they need to be, to reach for lofty explanations and complex solutions, when what we really need is to remember the most basic things about who we are and whose we are. We are the beloved children of the living God, whose claim on us and whose love for us is stronger and deeper than any fear that threatens to overwhelm us. As we wrestle with how God is calling us to be the church in this place at this time in the midst of profound change — changes in our culture, changes in our communities, changes in the way we “do church” — we need to take a page from David’s playbook. When he stands across the valley from the terrible giant, he remembers God’s faithfulness and, with a God-dominated imagination, he trusts his practiced aim with a slingshot and a stone, and he does what no one else there could.

If it feels like the giants in your life or in our life together are of a bigger scale entirely than a mere giant of a man, remember: this story is just the beginning of David’s story, and of Israel’s experience with kings. As David gets older, he will face challenges that are at least as big as this giant, and they will not be dispensed with so easily. When it becomes clear that David is next in line for the throne, Saul will come after him in a murderous rage. David will have to live like a fugitive in order to stay alive. His best friend will be killed, his wife will be taken away and given to another man. After he is finally king, David will abuse his power in the worst possibly ways, committing adultery and then murdering one of his loyal soldiers to cover it up. His infant son will die. He will deal with terrible conflict and tragedy in his own family, as his grown children scheme and plot to violate one another and their father. And near the end of his life, David will face a coup from his son, Absalom, who will be killed by David’s own men.

So in the face of this story, where David makes it look so easy to bring down a giant, we need to remember that David's life, while full of triumph and achievement, will not, in the end, be defined by his successes. He will show himself to be utterly human, terribly flawed, and defined by his desperate need of God's guidance, God's grace, God's promises, and God's love — just like each one of us.

Which is why those who wrote down David's story from a place of exile made sure that this story, the one where the shepherd boy takes down a mighty giant, comes right at the beginning of David's story. Because David will not be the underdog for long. There will come a day when David will forget that what defines him most fundamentally is his relationship to God. There will come a time when David's imagination becomes dominated by fear and lust and greed and doubt. But, perhaps because this childhood story of taking down Goliath persists in his memory — and in ours — David, even in his most unsavory moments, eventually remembers, and show us, what is most important: that though we may turn from God, God never turns from us.

We learn this in a whole new way in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, that Jewish prophet from the line of King David. Like David, Jesus shows us how to live with imaginations dominated by God, who has called us and liberated us and guided us and equipped us with what exactly we need to move beyond fear into the future God has prepared for us. As uncertain as that future might be, as much as we might fear the changes it requires of us, what we know for certain is that God is with us every step of the way. After all, this is the God who, in the immortal words of Israel's extraordinarily human king, leads us beside still waters, walks with us through life's darkest valleys, and nourishes us with a heavenly banquet when God brings us home. Amen.